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“Is It in My Head?”: The Pleasure and Pain of Listening to the Who, 1964-1973

Plaisir et douleur dans l’écoute des Who, 1964-1973

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"Is It in My Head?":
The Pleasure and Pain of Listening to the Who, 1964-1973

by

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Abstract: The Who were a successful English rock and roll band known for their popular songs and albums in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as for a very loud and raw performing style. If the Who had done nothing else, they would have secured a place in rock and roll history for using "feedback" in their live act, playing loud music, and smashing guitars and drums. This article examines the curious appeal of the Who's startling sound for an early generation of rock music fans, and how their brand of music found enthusiastic audiences first among local fans in 1964-1965, and then across the Atlantic through the early 1970s.

Keywords: *band – fans – fandom – feedback – guitar – noise – performance – violence – rock – pop – rock n' roll – the Who*

Résumé : The Who était un groupe de rock anglais à succès, célèbre pour ses chansons et ses albums des années 1960 et 1970, ainsi que pour l'intensité et le volume de ses performances. Sans préjuger du reste, le volume et la fureur auraient suffi à assurer au groupe une place dans l'histoire du rock and roll, grâce à l'utilisation en concert du larsen, le volume sonore et le bris de guitares et de batteries. Cet article interroge l'attrait étrange du son et du style de performance des Who auprès d'une première génération de fans de rock, d'abord localement dans les années 1964-65, puis outre Atlantique au début des années 1970.

Mots-clés : *groupe – fans – larsen – guitare – bruit – performance – violence – rock – pop – rock'n'roll – the Who*

The Who, an English rock and roll band that was influential for producing a number of popular songs and albums in the 1960s and 1970s, also became famous for a loud and raw performing style. From the start of their career in 1964, the Who turned up the volume to a painfully high level and used feedback – the loud, distorted sound made when notes are "looped" between the pickup of an electric guitar and a speaker – in some of their recorded songs (they were among the first rock bands to do so). The volume was even louder in their live performances, which also included on-stage destruction of equipment. If the Who had done nothing else, they would have secured a place in rock and roll history for playing loud and for smashing guitars and drums kits.

The curious appeal of the Who's high volume and startling performance style for an early generation of rock music fans has only recently begun to attract the attention of scholars interested in post-1945 Atlantic cultural history (Simonelli, 2002; Quirk and Toynbee, 2005; Duffet, 2009). This article examines the attraction of the band, covering the years from their start in 1964 to the release of their seminal double album *Quadrophenia* in 1973. "Is It in My Head," one of the songs from *Quadrophenia*, was the question the album's lead character, "Jimmy," struggled with as an adolescent in Mod-era London – the historical setting where the Who got their start and the place in which the album is situated. But the refrain also points to the ringing in the ears produced by the loud music that the fictional "Jimmy" and his Mod pals listened to, and to the actual chronic tinnitus that guitarist Pete Townshend, the author of *Quadrophenia* and of most Who songs, now suffers from as a result of many years of creating and performing loud music. The article introduces the Who and their music, and explores how this kind of loud – indeed potentially damaging – music could find enthusiastic audiences, first among the band's local fans in 1964-1965, and then across the Atlantic.

As this article describes, the first decade or so of the Who may be seen as emblematic of certain historical trends in post-1945 Atlantic culture (Harison, 2011), including as Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan have written, the persistent "facile romanticization" of loud, violent music in much of the literature on pop culture (2009: 194). However, the Who possessed inimitable qualities that set them apart from other rock bands of the day, contributing to their early success and remarkable longevity in a business populated by endless "one-hit wonders." Along with the loudness and the stage antics, the Who distinguished themselves from their contemporaries by the self-awareness that members of the group – particularly Townshend – possessed of their place in the larger sweep of things. Townshend had a sophisticated and, given the hearing damage he has suffered, perhaps inevitably ironic understanding of the strange appeal of high volume. This self-awareness about the moment in history of which they were a part, and of the odd combination of pleasure and pain that accompanied their music, imparted an unusual prescience to the band's lyrics and to the Who "brand" (Marsh, 2003; Wilkerson, 2008). It is not hard to cast moments in the rock

and roll story of the Who as microcosms: "capsules" of history that capture the convergence of historical threads, even one so surprising as the enjoyment of listening to painfully loud music.

The Who, 1964-1973

The Who brought to rock and roll music a style that was ear-splitting and eye-catching, and that was intended to make them stand out against an array of rivals coming onto the music scene on both sides of the Atlantic in the early 1960s. To name just a few of the best-known, in England the Beatles, Rolling Stones and Kinks were contemporaries of the Who; in the United States, where the variety of pop music formats was greater, there was Bob Dylan, the Byrds, James Brown and Motown artists such as Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder and the Supremes. The appearance of so many of the performers who were to become among the most famous and commercially successful pop acts of the twentieth century at a particular moment (the early- to mid-1960s) and place (the Atlantic basin of England and North America) makes it tempting to cast the story of the Who and their generation of rock and rollers as an historical anomaly: a development difficult to situate in a larger context and for which it is hard to identify the threads of causation – the "causes" – that brought it all about. But the pop music of the 1960s has a history: unlike the adolescent frustrations Pete Townshend was struggling to get across in the band's first hit single, "I Can't Explain" (1965), the history and appeal of the Who's special brand of rock and roll can indeed be explained (Gracyk, 2007).

The four members of the band – guitarist and principal songwriter Townshend, singer Roger Daltrey, bass guitarist John Entwistle and drummer Keith Moon – came together first as the Detours, then as the High Numbers and finally as the Who in 1964-1965 (Marsh, 2003: 103-115; Wilkerson, 2008: 28-55). This was a bit later than contemporaries like the Beatles, Rolling Stones and Kinks and so the Who were not among the first wave of "British Invasion" bands to bring their American-inspired electric rock and roll back to the United States.

At the start of their career, the Who were attached to a well-known contemporary "subculture": the London Mods. The Mods are well-known in the literature of post-1945 pop culture and sociology. In his influential *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, the sociologist Stanley Cohen recognized the special affinity that Mods had for certain groups like the Small Faces and, especially, the Who, the latter of whom "…explicitly stood for, sang about and understood (a gift nearly non-existent in the pop world) their origins…. [The Who's] dominant mood," wrote Cohen, "was uncertainty, the jumpiness and edginess of the hard Mods, and an almost ugly inarticulateness and tension … Their music was actively used by [Mods] as catalysts, and modes of expression" (1972: 159). The band's recognition of and fidelity to the place from which they sprang – Mod London, *circa* 1964 – comes through in their use of it as the setting for *Quadrophenia* (1973).

At the start, the Who mostly played the working-class clubs and music halls of West London patronized by Mods, translating American rock and roll, blues, and rhythm and blues into their own "power pop" interpretations (Marsh, 2003: 253). With a series of successful pop singles, including "Can't Explain," "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" and "Substitute," the band made a name for itself and cultivated a loyal fan base not only in England, but also in France, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands. The most important early single was 1965's "My Generation," which climbed to a number two ranking in the British record charts. The Who pushed their "brand" in 1965-1966 through relentless touring. A hard-working band from the start, the group made at least 181 live performances in 1964, all in England (McMichael and Lyons, 1997: 12-52). The year 1965 saw them perform a remarkable 234 times, again mostly in England, but also for the first time outside of the country. The Who's initial performance outside of Britain took place in Paris in June 1965. The band made a total of five stage appearances in Paris in 1965, with additional shows that year in Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands (*Ibid*.). It took a little longer for the band to become an Atlantic phenomenon. In the United States, the Who's early pop singles, including "My Generation," received little promotion and made little impact. It was not until an appearance at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival in California and subsequent tour that the Who gained notoriety in the United States and Canada. But with their appearance at Monterey, repeated cross-nation tours through both the United States and Canada, the publicity generated by their explosive stage performance and rowdy behavior off stage, and then the great success of their *Tommy* album from 1969, the band generated a large North American fan base. The size and loyalty of the Who's American audience, cemented by their revelatory performances at the Monterey (1967) and Woodstock (1969) music festivals, and the critical and popular triumph of *Tommy* made the band rich by the end of the decade and, like the Beatles and Rolling Stones, an Atlantic cultural phenomenon.

Rock bands came and went quickly in the 1960s. The Who lasted a long time (two surviving members still performed in 2013), became famous and achieved financial and critical success because of their catchy early singles ("My Generation" became a virtual youth anthem of the 1960s); a series of critically influential and commercially successful albums (*Tommy* [1969], *Who's Next* [1971] and *Quadrophenia* [1973]); the colorful personalities who made up the band; the intelligence of Townshend; and their loud music and on-stage antics – a visual and aural combination that, while accosting the sensibilities of some listeners, gained them a great deal of publicity and that, judging from their rapid ascent in the pop charts, struck a chord with young fans. The Who's early story – the loud music and the on-stage destruction of equipment – though now decades in the past, has become a well-known chapter in the history of rock music. Today, when the Who show up in print or on television or as part of the larger history of rock and roll, it is these elements that usually take center stage. Since Pete Townshend

first turned up the volume to ear-splitting levels and smashed his guitar at gigs in 1964, other rockers have done so too, so that these have become much-repeated and now iconic elements of rock performance (Kase, 2006: 422-23, 425-26). Accordingly, it can be easy to forget how truly startling the loud music, the destruction of equipment and the anger and frustration in the songs seemed in 1964-1965. Or how this kind of music conceivably could become commercially viable or promise any kind of longevity. Pop music, even its brashest new child, rock and roll, had not seen anything quite like this.

The Who and Volume

As Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan have described, music and violence have long had a joined history, beginning with "war songs" and "war cries," and used time and again in human history as "incitement" and "arousal" to violence (2009: 95, 123). While there is some of this in Who music – both song and performance – it would be wrong to misconstrue the origins or purpose of the violence. Early in their career, the Who brought to rock and roll the physical violence of smashing their instruments, along with the "aural violence" of loud drumming and the distortion and feedback coming from electric guitars amplified through the large speakers commissioned by Entwistle and Townshend for just this purpose. Townshend's "screeching feedback," a noise that "guitarists usually tried to avoid … was a revolutionary development, and … soon became an integral part of [his] sound" (Atkins, 1998: 15-16). Though the feedback and distortion were most prominent in the band's live shows, the Who were among the first groups to also intentionally incorporate the sound into their recordings, including early hits "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" and "My Generation." These innovations, writes John Atkins, "… confirmed the direction in which rock and roll was to go onstage, increasing volume and distortion to what would hitherto have been considered painful levels" (1998: 15-16). Copied and parodied as the style has become, the loudness and on-stage violence had no clear precedent in music history, and so in 1964-1965 it came across for many observers as a genuinely disturbing form of music-making. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that when the band smashed their instruments, threw smoke bombs and wrecked the set, it was not meant to be a call for aggression by fans and audience, since the mayhem by-and-large remained contained on stage.

Throughout their performance, the Who played loud. So loud that lyrics and individual instrumentation could be hard to distinguish. So loud that the music could be heard at a distance. So loud that the volume had a physical effect, making some in the audience queasy and disoriented. So loud, it could leave ears ringing for days afterward. It is not surprising that not only Townshend, but also many Who fans later came to attribute hearing problems to the concerts they attended in the 1960s and 1970s. There are a number of descriptions of the Who's loudness and their memorable – sometimes intimidating – performance from journalists and fans. A journalist describing a "gig" in 1965 was amazed by the cacophony:

> I arrived late and heard what sounded like someone sawing through an aluminum dustbin with a chainsaw to accompaniment of a drummer who was obviously in time with another group on another planet and the most deafening bass guitar in the world. The vocalist was virtually inaudible amidst the cacophony … The long lanky guitarist … was extracting a tortuous scream from his guitar which sounded as though several Siamese cats were being electrocuted inside his speaker cabinet. This, I was reliably informed, was 'feedback.' … The bass player [turned] … his volume control up so high that he could be heard in the next world. Finally the apocalypse arrived on cue when the guitarist raised his guitar above his head and smashed it to splinters on the stage while the drummer kicked his drums in the general direction of the vocalist who made a determined effort to hit him over the head with one of his cymbals. (Wilkerson, 2008: 36)

Before becoming a successful pop performer himself, Elton John saw the band at a London club in 1964 when they were still the High Numbers. He recalled: "They were astounding when they started out, they were so loud … Nobody knew what was going to happen. That wasn't the point; it was just sheer excitement" (Giuliano, 2002: 55). Nick Jones, later a journalist, but a member of a band in 1964, saw the group perform before a small audience of Mods in December 1964: "The hair stood up on the back of my neck. I remember instrumentals – 'Green Onions' – and the volume. (Other groups) only had little Vox AC30s, so this stack [of amplifiers] … it was immediately visual" (Black, 2001: 38). Another of the Who's early fans – "Irish" Jack Lyons (a model for "Jimmy" in *Quadrophenia*) – remembered this about their performance:

> Those standing in the very front would have to move back from the edge of the stage, 'cause the way Daltrey started, you'd think he was going to whack some cunt who might be standing too close. That was one thing about the Who – they fucking made you step back a bit. (Marsh, 2003: 133)

The Who brought their musical chaos to Paris during a three-day excursion in June 1965, performing at clubs and making television and radio appearances. The trip was arranged by their managers after being contacted by a French fan group, and marked the beginning of the band's popularity in France, a market that had otherwise been generally resistant to English acts (Neill and Kent, 2002: 57). Even at this early stage, French rock fans knew the Who's reputation for loud music and on-stage mayhem, and there was some apprehension from club managers about introducing them to the local music scene. During the visit, a television producer labeled the group "'a logical expression of the bewilderment and anarchy of London's teenagers" and the music magazine *Internationale des Rockers* described their music and style as "unsettling" (cited in Barnes, 1996: 40). *Disco Revue* thought the Who "most likely to become the triumphant group of 1966" and described a show this way:

> [T]he appearance of The Who seemed to evoke a strange supernatural presence. The audience understood that a new style of rock was being created, particularly with the song 'Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere' [which had much guitar feedback and distortion]. The wild drummer was capable of a lively, forceful rhythm … The singer came over as somewhat overpowering. The audience responded with ecstatic delirium. (Cited in McMichael and Lyons, 1997: 27)

Whether in London, Paris or elsewhere, the Who created a sound that shocked the senses while

adding a visual element that was hard to forget. Concerts often ended with Townshend smashing his guitar, drummer Keith Moon kicking over the drum kit and singer Roger Daltrey finding ways to extract terrible sounds from the microphone. The auto-destructive show made the dissonance seem all the more outrageous. Many observers and journalists responded to the loud volume and destruction with shock, mystification or disgust. But from the beginning, English and European rock and roll fans thrilled to the seemingly purposeless destruction. A Swedish fan attending a Who concert in Stockholm in late 1965 recalled the excitement of the noise and mayhem:

> On stage there were lots of Marshall amps and speakers looking as destroyed as I'd seen from photos. We forced our way towards the stage (not very easy). People were arriving in a steady stream. Then the music started. What a sound. And what volume. What a feeling. The crowd waved back and forth, one second three metres from the stage, the next right in front of it … I guess there was some kind of panic, you couldn't do anything but follow the waves … Then Pete started to smash his guitar and his speakers, and I started shivering. Somebody let off a smoke bomb. It was total chaos. Pete ended the berserk by pushing his whole Marshall stack into the audience. This was of course the heaviest life concert I had ever experienced in my life. (Black, 2001: 86)

The Who seemed to be louder than most other bands in 1964 and 1965. Later, when their volume was measured, they were. In 1976, *The Guinness Book of World Records* – a popular compendium that compiled trivia of this sort – listed the Who as "record holder" for the loudest concert ever: more than 120 decibels, which was comparable to being within 100 yards of a jet plane taking off (Marsh, 2003: 477). Dubious as some of the *Guinness Book* records may be, this was the kind of sought-after distinction – "loudest rock band in the world" – that would have been incomprehensible a generation earlier. Loudness was not a quality that songwriters and composers had normally sought from their music, since high volume tended to distort the sound. The harshness of their sound did not deter the members of the Who, who seemed to compete against each other to be the loudest on the stage. Listeners were amazed that so much noise could be produced by just four performers. Richard Barnes, a friend of the band since the early sixties and later a chronicler of their history, remembered their performances at London's Marquee Club as "… aggressive, punchy and very loud … Their live act was staggering and unbeatable" (1996: 41). Barnes recalled the visit of the journalist Roy Carr from *New Musical Express* magazine. Carr, who was himself in a band, first saw the Who:

> … in a dance hall …, one of those places that was all wood and cavernous and echoed, there was a lot of echo even with two thousand people in and the band was so loud that my bass player with me stood there and was physically sick …' The Who's act was like a total no-holds-barred assault on the senses. There were no half-measures; they threw everything they had at the audience, ending with a blitz on their own equipment, which they would systematically destroy, and, in a cloud of smoke and fused smouldering amps and other debris, simply walk off stage. (Barnes, 1996: 41)

"Reactions to the Who's stage act," Barnes wrote, "varied from complete and utter awe and disbelief, through total excitement to outright anger

and contempt. Experiencing the Who live never left anyone indifferent" (1996: 44).

The band's loudness was generated by a combination of ingredients. Townshend and Entwistle turned up guitars and amplifiers to high volume. One of the early innovations the band used to increase the reach of the sound was to "stack" Marshall amplifiers, in effect "creating a wall of feedback" (Giuliano, 2002: 36). Later, Townshend recalled of these early years when he was searching for higher volume that he had "drifted into using bigger and bigger amps. Bigger, more powerful, more distorted, more potent" (Wilkerson, 2008: 29). The places where they played also had a role in generating the loudness. Early in their career, the band mostly performed in small clubs and music halls around London, like the local Goldhawk Social Club, which was a space that contained and augmented the sound. The outdoor concerts they played in northern Europe in the mid-1960s were made loud by multiplying the amplifiers. Later in the decade, and then especially through the 1970s, the Who would perform at large indoor concerts, including prestigious settings like the Metropolitan Opera in New York and the London Coliseum, and subsequently enormous indoor and outdoor football stadiums in the United States, England and Europe. They adjusted to the larger settings by increasing the size and number of speakers. As the concerts got bigger, band members practically took it as a personal challenge to make the volume loud enough to fill whatever space they were playing. The Who were not the only performers to play really loud – contemporaries Jimi Hendrix, Cream, Led Zeppelin and many other bands also played at ear-splitting levels, serving as forerunners of the equally loud heavy metal bands that first appeared on the music scene in the late 1960s. But the Who were the first to give volume a special emphasis and to connect it directly to their own "brand."

In the end, perhaps the singular thing that made the Who louder than other groups was the energy and force with which they handled their instruments. For bass guitarist Entwistle, this was partly a matter of lightning-fast fingers, ramping up the volume and not being bashful about taking the lead in songs. In most rock bands, the "lead" guitar was the regular electric guitar, but in the Who it was often Entwistle who took this role. Some of the Who's best known songs, including "My Generation," were highlighted by Entwistle's bass guitar solos. For Moon playing the drums, as for Townshend on the electric guitar, the loudness came partly through the shear application of force, as well as from Moon's "revolutionary" additions to the standard drum kit of extra tom-toms, cymbals and a second bass drum, all of which he "hit … in full force, constantly" (Marsh, 2003: 88). Daltrey recalled (perhaps with a little exaggeration) that the first time he stood in front of Moon's drum kit, it was like standing next to the jet engine of an airplane. Indeed, describing a 1967 concert in St. Petersburg, Florida, Tom Wright (like Richard Barnes a longtime friend and chronicler of the Who) wrote that "The music was so loud it had felt like we were standing inside a jet engine … A deejay at the side of the stage, his eyes wide, ears ringing, could only mumble, 'Wow, wow, wow,' over and over. The audience didn't know if they

liked it or not. They'd come to see Herman [Herman's Hermits, a British Invasion band the Who opened for on this tour], but they'd gotten bulldozed in the face by the Who" (Wright, 2007: 8). A sign of the force with which Moon battered his drums is that one of the tasks of "roadies" before concerts was to nail Moon's drum kit to the floor so that it could not be dislodged (at least not until Moon had set explosives to it, which he sometimes did). Meanwhile, Townshend perfected an athletic style of guitar-playing that made him one of the most eye-catching stage presences in rock history, this at the same time he was eliciting strange, rough, electronic noises from his guitar. He did this not only by striking the strings with force, but also by banging the guitar into the amplifiers, smashing it on the stage floor and sweeping it across the microphone stand. Sometimes, Townshend struck the guitar strings so violently with his trademark "windmill" motion that it left his right hand bloodied (Wright, 2007: 15-16). As the "front man" of the band, Daltrey had to compete with the noise from the instruments and amplifiers, and so he developed a powerful voice, producing memorable roars, with the primal scream near the end of "Won't Get Fooled Again" (1971) one of the most recognizable in rock history.

This was the effect of the Who live. However over the years, more and more fans heard the band not in concert, but on the radio or record player. The Who emerged on the scene in England in 1964 as popular entertainment was expanding beyond familiar settings like theater, music halls and cinemas and into individual homes via television, transistor radios and record players, all of which brought music more directly to a new generation of fans than ever before (Ennis, 1992: 132-35). By the late 1960s, the teenager alone in his or her bedroom listening to rock music on the radio or on a record player or through headphones had become a stock image of the era. At a Who concert, the music, theatrics and hint of danger that went with being part of a raucous crowd was accentuated by the impossibly loud noise. But as the Who began to release albums in the mid-1960s, these were qualities that fans could sample vicariously by listening to their songs on a car radio or cassette player or record player at home. It was not a given that the Who, who had established themselves on the basis of their singles and their memorable live performance, might also succeed at making albums – the Beatles, for instance, mostly stopped performing live after they achieved critical and commercial success recording albums (Julien, 2008: 1-2). As it turned out, the Who were able to balance the transition as successfully as any other group from the 1960s.

The catchy singles that the Who had excelled at making early in their career, or the later conceptually-sophisticated long-playing albums, when heard at high volume either in concert or at home with the headphones on seemed to produce sensory thrills that fans could not get elsewhere. If one lived near one of the larger cities where rock and roll tours tended to stop, there might be a chance to see the band play live. But the reality was that over the years most fans listened to recorded music. As the rock album began to replace the 45-rpm single as the main mode of listening for rock fans in the late 1960s, and as the individual stereo systems

that could be purchased relatively inexpensively and set up in a home or automobile became more widespread, most fans probably came to know the Who through their albums rather than through the live concert.

On the one hand, the rock album culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s worked in favor of bands like the Who whose music presented complex ideas and who began to include additional instruments beyond guitars and drums (horns in *Tommy* and electronically-generated sounds in *Who's Next* and *Quadrophenia*). Changes in the radio industry were another factor. The FM radio frequency lent itself to extended airplay, for which an album like *Tommy* was the ideal candidate. Similarly, the emergence of a school of rock journalism, album "cover art" and a youth culture associated with the local record store were developments for which the style and pretensions of the Who were perfectly positioned. The Who's success in making high concept albums and even a "rock opera" (*Tommy*) meant that fans did not have to be at a live concert to experience the thrill of the music. Rather, they could do so at home with the music turned up through stereo speakers or headphones. As Daniel Levitin writes, headphones "opened up a world of sonic colors, a palette of nuances and details that went far beyond the chords and melody, the lyrics, or a particular singer's voice" (2006: 2). For Who fans, the band's music seemed to require that it be played loud, and now this could happen as easily through headphones as in the live concert experience.

For years, the Who had prided themselves on their extraordinary live performance, yet the solitary way of being a fan only seemed to enhance their success. The emergent album culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s allowed the Who to develop and exploit the ambitious concepts in Townshend's imagination, the musical virtuosity of Entwistle and Moon, and the confidence and "new voice" that Daltrey discovered from singing *Tommy* in concert. Through their albums beginning with 1967's *The Who Sell Out*, the band was able to explore in more linear form the frustration and anger that had come in energetic bursts during their days as a "singles band." And if fans wanted the music loud, all they had to do was turn up the volume on their record player. As *Live at Leeds* (1970), one of the best-selling and most acclaimed live rock albums of all time, showed, the Who's live stage act remained as charged, energetic and loud as ever – now captured for good as recorded sound. John Atkins describes listening to the album as:

> … an intensely aural experience. It is a record dedicated to presenting sound in its most undiluted sense, and it communicates meaning in exclusively visceral terms, without any concessions to pop accessibility. Its purpose is to preserve the live Who sound with absolute authenticity, which it admirably achieves. The record is loud, brash, vibrant, thunderous, raw and immensely exciting – rock and roll in its purest form. In short, it captures almost all the best qualities of a Who performance (allowing for some sensory loss in not being there and witnessing the event in person) and sounds like an all-out assault on the senses with a white-hot level of energy; it's rock music with sweat dripping from its brow and blood pumping through its veins. (1998: 129-30)

The Who remained loud even after the novelty had worn off: the "world record," as noted earlier,

was set in 1976. The loudness and excitement of the Who continued even as the band took their music in new directions in the late 1960s. This was a musical evolution that did not seem to compromise the band's essential brand, and that their fans accepted.

Making Sense of the Who's Loud Music

Before *Tommy a*nd *Quadrophenia* had elevated the Who to rock royalty, the thing that drew the attention of promoters, journalists and the kids who became their fans, was the strange effects coming from Pete Townshend's and John Entwistle's guitars, Keith Moon's thunderous style of drumming and the overall loudness and energy of the "scene" they generated. How, journalists asked in 1964-1965, could this be considered music? Some music fans, too, were unhappy with the loud turn that pop music had taken: Bob Dylan, a contemporary of the Who, was famously booed by folk music fans when he switched from acoustic to electric guitar at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, and then was mercilessly heckled during his American and British tours of 1966 (Lee, 1998). How was it that at this time some fans came to favor music that was almost unbearably loud, and in which individual instrumentation and lyrics were often drowned out by the overpowering noise? Why did musicians seek a sound that could make one physically ill and leave ears ringing for days afterward? Why would anyone listen to music that could actually damage one's hearing?

There is no single answer to these questions, but rather a set of explanations. As Johnson and Cloonan write, music pervades virtually all of human life and culture, in the past and today: "… entangled with memory, emotion, dynamics of identity and taste, relations of power or conflict" (2009: 14). For the mostly working-class youths from London neighborhoods like the Who's own Shepherd's Bush, the band offered qualities – including noise – that appealed specifically to them; different, yet familiar to the music coming from America, done in a style that the usual forms of entertainment could not match, and performed by "blokes" who looked like them. The loudness of the band seemed to match and channel the brashness, anger and self-destructive ennui of the typical Mod. The Who's brand of rock and roll was a new kind of music, maybe even a new form of art: really loud, using still-developing technology, and performed by energetic and insolent teenagers giving voice to the frustrations of their audience. In 1965, this was a still hard-to-grasp development that the precocious Pete Townshend attempted to convey to journalists and interviewers (Wilkerson, 2008: 57-59). That the music could be strikingly different from what existed, that it could at once produce aural pain and pleasure, and that it attracted fans, naturally struck many as a novelty that would not sell many records and really had no future. But as we have seen, the style worked and the music lasted.

As fans and journalists attest, the Who's loud music, heard live at a concert or through stereo speakers or headphones, could produce both pleasure and pain. Historical precedents for the

individual and commercial appeal of this sort of thing are difficult to find. Indeed, the desire to produce very high volume appears by-and-large unique to rock and roll, a phenomenon scholars have only recently begun to explore (Johnson and Cloonan, 2009: 150-160). Stanley Cohen wrote about the appeal of the Who's deafening music to the Mods, though his analysis of the "moral panic" of 1964-1965 really is more about "reaction" against a cultural norm than its "reception" (Cohen, 1972: 158-60). Arguably more germane is Gareth Stedman Jones' concept of the "redemptive power of violence" – an idea not specifically about music, but which nonetheless speaks in intriguing ways to the historical genesis of inarticulate violence, including aural violence, like the loudness and on-stage mayhem of the Who (Jones, 2008: 1-22). Jones, a scholar interested in the great intellectual figures of the nineteenth century, argues that Thomas Carlyle, Karl Marx and Charles Dickens were keen to the development of certain crucial impulses of their day, including the relationship of popular violence to working-class "revenge" and "inarticulacy." What do Carlyle, Marx and Dickens have to do with the loud music of Townshend, Entwistle, Daltrey and Moon? Though Jones' focus is on these influential nineteenth-century writers and thinkers, it is not hard to pick out the "redemptive violence" and inarticulacy in Who songs like "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" and "My Generation." Applying Jones' ideas to Who songs allows us to view them as metaphorical "weapons" used to "assault," with sound and distortion, not only the audience of teenagers standing before them, but also the larger audience of accepted musical taste. This is an interpretation that meshes easily with the explanations for the loud volume offered by Townshend. Indeed, Townshend was not shy about the metaphor: "My guitar is like a machine gun. When I play it, it's like grenades going off. It silences the audience. It makes them hear me … It was also a means of intimidation. This is all there is. If you're in this room with us, all you get is us" (Giuliano, 2002: 64-5). In a Who performance circa 1965, as for the rebellious nineteenth-century working-class crowds that drew the attention of Carlyle, Marx and Dickens, there was a kind of cathartic redemption that went with the violence – indeed, it was the catharsis and revitalizing effect, not the violence, that drove rock and roll.

Another way to get at the appeal of the Who's loud music is through the words of band members themselves, particularly Townshend, the group's main songwriter and a thoughtful commentator on the volume and violence of which he was the main protagonist. On one level, Townshend saw the loudness and aggression as a reflection of his own frustration and youthful angst. As a biographer writes, this way of performing provided the performer with "a major ego boost" (Giuliano, 2002: 54). On occasion, the aural violence could also be a product of frustration with an un-responsive audience. In 1965, Townshend said "When I get the feedback noise, it sounds like a bomber. Then Moon can bang the drums, and the audience thinks of guns and smashing people up" (Giuliano, 2002: 63-64). Keith Moon considered the ruckus and noise a big "laugh," while also recognizing its adolescent seed and author: "This

'being angry at the adult world' bit is not all of us. It's not me and it's not John. It's only half Roger, but it is Pete" (Wilkerson, 2008, 56). Daltrey, who probably contributed least to the on-stage mayhem and loud volume, thought it had to do with too many drugs and with the boredom of playing the same songs over-and-over (Wilkerson, 2008: 56). Though the destruction of instruments and the loud noise became a self-conscious part of the performance, it was certainly more than just an act for Townshend. While the Who were not a political band in the vein of a contemporary group like the MC5, some of the initial inspiration for the violence came from the influence of Gustav Metzger, the Austrian proponent of "auto-destructive" art who Townshend knew from his time at art school in the early 1960s (Wilkerson, 2008: 45). Judging from his writings and the interviews he has given over the years, there was also an historical sensibility to the loudness and mayhem that fits with the views of Stedman Jones, since Townshend almost always connected it to the particular time and place where it began – London, *circa* 1964 – and to the inarticulateness and search for the right words felt by Mods (Harison, 2011: 58). In this regard, the Who very much belong to a post-1945 generation of "angry young men," their lyrics springing from frustrations they felt about English society and culture, now delivered loudly and with anarchic energy, through rock and roll. Egging on and facilitating the pandemonium were the band's early managers, Kit Lambert and Chris Stamp, who relished the publicity it generated and who pushed the band in this direction (Marsh, 2003: 104-115).

Yet another approach to the historical origins, popular appeal and simple thrill of the Who's loud rock music is through its emotional elements. The relationship between music and emotion is a topic that has been widely explored by scholars, including Johnson and Cloonan, who note that "certain emotional responses to sound are so-to-speak hard-wired" in listeners (2009: 18). Likewise, writes Steven Mithen, "Music is remarkably good at expressing emotion and arousing emotion in its listeners – a fact captured in the popular notion that music is the 'language of the emotions'" (Mithen, 2006: 24-25, 94). As Mithen notes, scholars in disciplines including anthropology, musicology and psychology long ago established "a very strong correlation between the emotion intended by the musicians and that which the listeners believed was being expressed" (Mithen, 2006: 93). Daniel Levitin, a former musician, record producer and now a cognitive psychologist, has explored these issues in *This Is Your Brain on Music* (2006). "Composers," he writes, "imbue music with emotion by knowing what our expectations are and then very deliberately controlling when those expectations will be met, and when they won't. The thrills, chills, and tears we experience from music are the result of having our expectations artfully manipulated by a skilled composer and the musicians who interpret that music" (Levitin, 2006: 111). It is easy to locate strong emotions in Who songs: the frustrations and anger of "I Can't Explain" and "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere"; the defiance of "My Generation"; or the search for community ("one note, Pure and Easy") from Townshend's aborted

multi-media (album and film set around continuous audience-band interaction) project of the early 1970s: "Lifehouse" (Wilkerson, 2008: 154-159). Judging by the testimonials that have been collected, the fans to whom the Who's loud music appealed seem to have felt the same set of emotions as the band members themselves; indeed, this was what most Who music was about (Black, 2001).

It is also possible to situate the emotions evoked by loud music within a broader "history of emotions," a still-evolving field of inquiry. William Reddy has coined the term "emotive" to describe the process by which emotions are managed and shaped by both societal expectations and individuals seeking to express the inexpressible, namely how they "feel." Emotives take the familiar "primary documents" of modern popular culture, including song lyrics and stage performance, as fully-formed emotional cues (Reddy, 2000: 111-113). Another historian, Barbara Rosenwein, has written of "emotional communities" (Rosenwein, 2002: 821-45). Rosenwein's examples are mostly from the Middle Ages, but the analysis fits rock and roll, whose "community" may be defined by the concert hall and the experience of listening to albums; this is a community that, arguably, becomes transatlantic over time. A history of emotions framework helps explain the appeal of the Who's loud music across national borders, across time, and across demographic categories, and points as well to the musical and psychological directions Townshend took with *Tommy* and the failed "Lifehouse" project.

There also may be a physiological explanation for the appeal of loud music. Testimony from members of the Who and from fans speak to what might be called the "exquisite pain" of loud music. Indeed, the live effect of the music was physical for performers and fans (Johnson and Cloonan, 2009: 24-26, 30). "Sound is power," write Johnson and Cloonan: "…unharnessed, specific physical characteristics of sound and its relationship to the audient can alter physiological states" (2009: 18). Even the ringing in the ears and the nausea produced by a loud concert could be alluring. As scholars have noted, the distinction between pleasure and pain – in rock music as in other areas of human activity – could be narrow indeed. Daniel Levitin cites the example of a Who concert where loudness reached 126-130 decibels, the very "threshold of pain and damage":

> Earplugs at a Who concert can minimize the risk of permanent damage by bringing down the levels that reach the ear close to 100-110 dB… A lot of people like really loud music. Concert goers talk about a special state of consciousness, a sense of thrills and excitement, when the music is really loud – over 115 dB. We don't yet know why this is so. Part of the reason may be related to the fact that loud music saturates the auditory system, causing neurons to fire at their maximum rate. When many, many neurons are maximally firing, this could cause an emergent property, a brain state qualitatively different from when they are firing at normal rates. (Levitin, 2006: 71)

Finally, fans experiencing the Who's loud music sought a unique "thrill" that defied explanation. Chris Stamp, one of the Who's early managers, spoke for many fans when he recalled: "'To my mind their act creates emotions of anger and violence, and a thousand other things I don't really understand myself" (Atkins, 1998: 18). Indeed,

few fans formulated complex explanations for the allure of the music. Decades later, Binky Philips, a long-time American fan, retold the story of seeing the Who in 1967 at one of their first concerts in New York City: "This kinda punk behavior was completely novel, wild, even disconcerting … The Who simply produced the loudest, most brutally raw and exciting sound I've ever experienced" (2011: 4). The attraction for Philips, as for so many other fans, was visceral and sprang from the frustrations, the anger, the "redemptive violence" in the Who's songs, the band's energetic stage performance, and the ways that all of these elements were mysteriously channeled via loud music.

Conclusion

Researchers cannot yet fully explain the appeal of loud music for musicians and fans. For the moment, it is clear that listening to loud music over time can be harmful to one's hearing. Pete Townshend, for one, came to know this. It would be surprising if most fans, too, were not aware of the damage they were sustaining by going to live concerts or by putting on headphones and turning up the volume. And yet as the Who continued to perform beyond Keith Moon's death in 1978 and through a "farewell" tour in 1982, the volume was as great as ever.1 By this time, the band members and fans were showing the effects of listening to loud music, and doctors were beginning to issue public warning about hearing loss associated with loud music (Johnson and Cloonan, 2009: 168, 170). Though Roger Daltrey has not spoken of damage, John Entwistle seemed to have suffered impaired hearing before his death in 2002. By the 1970s, Townshend had developed severe tinnitus, and for several years now has written and spoken publicly (to BBC News in January 2006, for instance), cautioning rock fans about the damage that can be done by loud music played live or heard through headphones.

It is only fair to the Who and their music to conclude by noting that the focus here on the early years of the band overstates the role of volume and on-stage violence in the longer history of the band. There is in fact another side to their work, which began playing out in the late 1960s with the enormous success of *Tommy*, the concluding song of which is the overtly tender "See Me, Feel Me, Touch Me." Though Townshend still occasionally smashed a guitar after 1968, he did this less often over the years. The loudness remained through the early 1980s, but the angry, auto-destructive phase of the Who's career evolved over time. Despite Townshend's impaired hearing, he and Daltrey, the remaining members of the Who, continue to occasionally perform live with a renewed passion for the old songs and with the creative drive still there: *Quadrophenia*, including "Is It in My Head," was put together as a full show and taken on tour in 1996-1997 and 2012-2013, a new album (*Endless Wire)* was released in 2006, and the group performed live at the 2009 Super Bowl – but with the music played at lower volume.

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Note

1. Drummer Kenney Jones replaced Keith Moon in 1979. Townshend, Entwistle and Daltrey would regroup and tour as the Who in the late 1990s and early 2000s.